



The Libre Initiative - an Innovative Conservative Effort to Recruit Latino Support

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Americans of Latino descent are a growing segment of the U.S. electorate – yet many Republicans and conservatives have alienated these voters by taking stands sharply at odds with their views and even questioning the presence of many Latino immigrants in the country. Nevertheless, far-sighted conservative strategists are actively orchestrating outreach in Latino communities – above all through a well-resourced effort called the Libre Initiative. Our research uses data from websites and public statements to assess the scope and focus of Libre efforts.

The Who, What, and Where

Founded in 2011 as a new, specialized organization within the political network run by the conservative mega-donors Charles and David Koch, Libre is a legally chartered 501(c)4 non-profit, officially non-partisan, focused on “equip[ing] the Hispanic community with the tools they need to be prosperous.” Paid Libre staffers and grassroots organizers organize community events to inform Latinos about the benefits of limited government and fiscal conservatism.

Researchers have discovered that Latinos are more likely to vote for GOP candidates or respond to conservative messages if they are contacted by co-ethnics. Libre seems to have been staffed with such relationships in mind, because 81% of its 47 staffers and grassroots organizers are Latinos. Slightly more than three in five are males.

Most Libre outreach is concentrated in electoral swing states with the largest Latino populations, including Florida, Virginia, Ohio, and Nevada; and the Initiative is also active in new immigrant gateways and Latino strongholds such as Colorado and Texas. Interestingly, however, only three percent of Libre events we tallied were hosted in California, despite that state’s huge Latino population. Labor unions and liberal community organizations have a strong presence among California Latinos, and conservative efforts may not seem too costly given the state’s strong Democratic tilt.

Libre is tightly connected to other Koch organizations – including the large, nationwide advocacy federation Americans for Prosperity. To raise funds, Libre’s director, Daniel Garza, attends semi-annual Koch donor seminars; and both Garza and Libre’s Vice President of Operation and Policy, Jorge Lima, spoke at Americans for Prosperity’s annual “Defending the Dream” Summit held in August 2015 in Columbus, Ohio, for more than 4000 conservative activists. Lima spoke about the virtues of school choice for Latino families, and Garza explained Libre’s mission and successes to the predominately white attendees.

Institutional Collaborations to Meet Latinos on Their Own Ground

To make headway against political headwinds, Libre organizers work to build credibility slowly among upwardly mobile Latinos on ground that they find welcoming. A prime strategy is to collaborate with well-established and trusted organizations, which were recruited to co-sponsor more than two-thirds of the 200 Libre events held from 2013 to 2015.

- Libre most often teamed up to co-sponsor events with Latino-oriented non-profits, like *La Casa de Esperanza* and the *Latino Coalition*.
- Religious organizations, but not Catholic churches, were also common collaborators. For instance, Libre co-hosted events with *El Ministerio Internacional El Rey Jesus* in Hialeah Gardens, Florida and with

Abundant Life Church in San Antonio, Texas.

- Libre also regularly sets up booths at public cultural events and college fairs, and co-sponsors discussions at colleges and universities – including at Arizona State University, the University of Florida, and Texas A&M University.

Libre's Message

Once Libre leaders find listening ears, what do they discuss?

- Especially at universities and community colleges, events often focus on immigration and target young people, as in the *Estamos Contigo* (We Are With You) campaign. Latinos are encouraged to advocate for economically beneficial immigration reforms.
- Capitalizing on hopes for economic mobility, Libre touts cut-backs in government regulation. Advertisements for a community festival in Virginia, for example, urged people to “come learn about our mission to continue empowering the U.S. Hispanic/Latino Community to follow the principles of Economic Freedom that lead to individual prosperity.”
- Entrepreneurship and business are the third most common topic. Libre organizers target active and aspiring entrepreneurs – including Latinas – by sharing tips and information on how to successfully start, run, and expand small businesses.
- School choice is another key topic. For example, Libre hosts rallies in Austin and San Antonio, Texas, advocating the benefits of this reform for Latino children.

Latino Outreach and the Future of GOP Conservatism

Beyond engaging Latinos, Libre leaders make efforts to re-frame expectations about among white conservatives. At the 2015 Defending the American Dream Summit, for instance, Executive Director Garza, himself the son of migrant farmworkers, spoke of immigrants as hard working, noble and worthy of respect, and made the case that Latinos are a crucial electoral constituency. Some white listeners audibly grumbled against the immigrant-friendly statements.

As this episode suggests, efforts at Latino outreach can provoke tensions with nativist-minded whites in the larger conservative movement. But in the Koch network, at least, strategists understand the importance of mobilizing a measure of support within this fast-growing segment of the U.S. electorate. Libre is a generously resourced, well-staffed, patient effort to build conservative beachheads in Latino communities – not just in the heat of election campaigns but for the long term. The stakes are high. If Libre succeeds, it may be able to recruit young Latino activists and trim Democratic vote margins in swing states and districts. And if conservative GOPers can gain pockets of support in a fast-changing electorate, the political right may be able to continue to enact free-market, anti-government policies generally unpopular among Latinos.